
5 Belarus

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5.1 THE NATIONAL AND HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXTS

National Context

Belarus is a country of approximately 9.5 million people (CIA, 2019a), of which close to 10 percent are between the ages of 15–24 years old. The country is aging, with the number of citizens above the age of 60 increasing by 14 percent in the next decade (World Bank, 2018e). There will be a corresponding decline in the country's student-age population. The University sector is facing a contracting pool of potential students.

The country borders Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine, and Russia. It is becoming increasingly urbanized, with an 8 percent increase in the last ten years (from 67 percent to 75 percent), which is approximately one million people moving from the countryside to cities (World Bank, 2018e). Most universities also are located in and around the capital of Minsk.

The country is facing ongoing political tensions. The long-serving president, Alexander Lukashenko, in September 2020 faced a series of protests and pressure from Western governments regarding his credibility and contested elections. He has continued support from Russia. The country was one of the staging areas for the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The Lukashenko government has been in power since 1994. The government has kept in place many of the Soviet policies, including state ownership (SOE) over much of the economy.

As late as 2016, approximately half of the workforce was employed by SOEs (World Bank, 2018e). This government-controlled economic approach initially served the country well post-independence, adding needed economic

stability. Until the global financial recession of 2008, the country's economy grew at rates between 6.3 and 8.3 percent, surpassing others in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) (7.1 percent) and countries in Europe and Central Asia (5.7 percent). The year 2008 marked a turning point for its centralized economy, with growth averaging 3 percent between 2009–2014; and the Republic faced a recession in 2015–2016 (World Bank 2018e). The government is again working to reform the economy, slowly shifting its role away from direct to indirect economic involvement and supporting private sector development (World Bank, 2018e).

The strength of the private sector is limited to select parts of the economy – IT, domestic trade, wood processing, plastics and rubber production, real estate, accounting and audit, advocacy, advertising and marketing, and ground transportation. SOEs, on the other hand, dominate key economic sectors including agriculture, the chemical industry, machinery and equipment, construction materials, food processing, hotels, and architecture and urban planning (World Bank, 2018e).

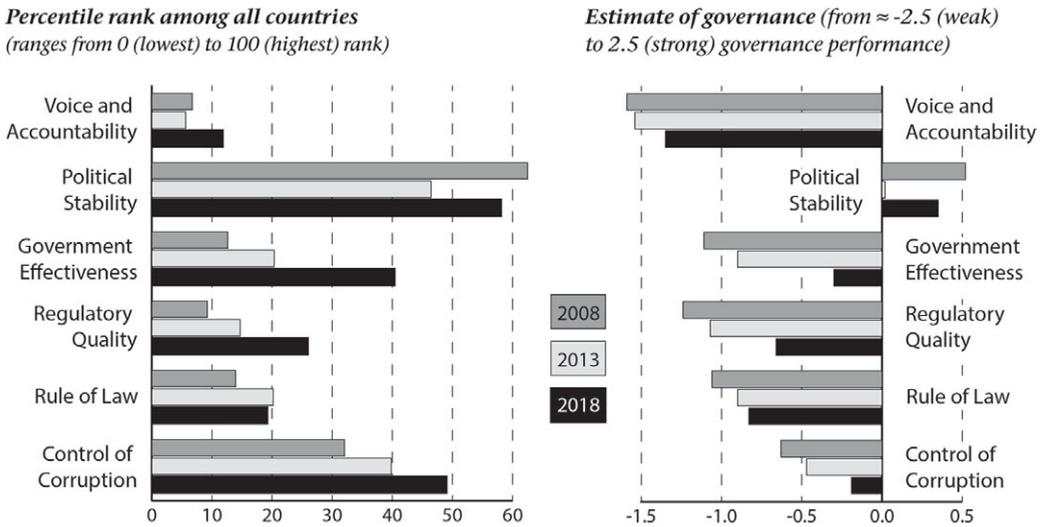
To support continuing economic growth, the state will need to further change its role from a producer of goods and services to a regulator, moving away from its traditions of command and control rules and procedures (World Bank, 2018e). The government faces challenges in doing this, including a noted lack of commitment to reforms, frequent legislative changes, and a lack of policies and coordination across levels of government (World Bank, 2018e). Furthermore, such economic shifts have the potential to disrupt the expected social contract in ways that lead to societal fractions and disenfranchisement, particularly within the college-age and youth population, and lead to an increased vulnerability within the middle class (Bussolo, Davalos, Peragine & Sundaram, 2019).

Other profiles in this book include World Economic Forum indicators. None exist for this country.

The national governing context according to the World Bank's Governance Indicators¹ project is as follows in terms of governance. These figures are intended to show trends over time associated with a set of country-level data. The governing context scores are low, particularly for voice and accountability, but also for rule of law and regulatory quality. Although many of the World Bank's governance indicators are trending toward improved governance, all prior to the 2020 conflicts, as a set they

¹ Other country profiles include an overview of the World Economic Forum global competitiveness scores. WEF did not include Belarus in its 2018–2019 efforts.

Figure 5.1 Worldwide governance indicators for Belarus



are weak, except for political stability. Voice and accountability are very low. Both of which reflect the undemocratic political context. The context in which universities operate is one of strong governmental control, low participation, and an economy controlled by the state. Furthermore, its population is aging, with the fastest growing segments well beyond traditional higher education and school age (Figure 5.1).

Shape and Structure of Higher Education

The Belarusian higher education system includes fifty-one higher education institutions (HEIs) of which forty-two are public or state and nine private or non-state (Belsat, 2019a). The overwhelming majority of the 268,100 students are enrolled in public universities. Private universities enroll only 6.8 percent of students. Enrollment has declined from its high of approximately 445,600 in 2011–2012 to approximately 268,100 in 2018–2019, a 40 percent reduction in just seven years. Current enrollment is at its lowest level in two decades (Belsat, 2019b). Half of public universities and eight of nine private universities are located in the capital of Minsk.

Of the public HEIs, thirty-one are universities offering a range of degree programs; nine are academies or conservatories offering a limited number of

disciplinary programs; and two are institutes offering an even more limited range of programs (National Statistical Committee, 2017), a legacy of the Soviet model. Half of the public universities fall under the direct jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education (MoE) with the others operating under other ministries, although the MoE has continued influence over these universities as well.

There is a mismatch between graduate output and economic needs with an estimated 68 percent of students studying social sciences and humanities (World Bank, 2018e). An International Finance Corporation study in 2013 noted that 20 percent of employers report skills gaps of graduates as a top barrier for them (World Bank, 2018e). The higher education system seems to be out of step with economic needs and lacks capacity to produce a needed workforce.

Furthermore, universities and students have become a target of politically motivated state actions. Following the 2020 election, police detained students and their universities expelled them for their participation in protests (O'Malley, 2021).

Higher Education Governing Context

The University sector is strongly controlled by the State, similar to other economic sectors. There is very low autonomy, if any. For instance, 65 percent of the undergraduate curriculum is a “national component,” as is 30 percent of master’s degree program curricula and newly introduced undergraduate programs have only a 50 percent requirement (World Bank, 2020d). The president of the Republic is directly involved in certain aspects of University governance (World Bank, 2020d). He approves the appointment of the rectors of public universities and develops aspects of the legal framework governing universities. For example, he replaced rectors at three universities during the 2020 civil unrest. At Minsk State Linguistic University, he elevated the head of the German Language department, and at The Belarusian State University of Culture and Art, he appointed the former deputy minister of culture (Belsat, 2020). Both of these universities had student protests. This governmental reach continues into private universities as well. For instance, rectors of private (non-state) universities are appointed by the minister of education based upon a recommendation from the University founders.

Some students pay fees, and those that do pay comparatively low fees of EUR600–1,370. Institutions are allowed to generate revenue and use this at their discretion (MoE, 2011), allowing some financial autonomy. However,

this highly controlled sector operating in an economy that is significantly state owned, means that there is little actual institutional autonomy. The president of the country appoints rectors, and those rectors are the most influential individuals on campus (World Bank ,2020d).

5.2 GOVERNING BODY PROFILE

Body Structure

The primary governance body is the University Council. Universities also have management or administrative Councils. Most Belarusian universities have this single governance body. However, some universities have parallel bodies related to research and scientific inquiry, such as at Yanka Kupala State University of Grodno. The Councils meet as few as five times per year and as frequently as monthly.

Membership

Membership of the Council is internal to the University, including the rector, vice rectors, heads of institutes and academic staff, students (25 percent), and non-academic staff, including representatives from trade unions. Some Councils include representatives of public organizations that are affiliated with the University. These individuals seem to be few in number – between three and five, depending on the University – if they exist at all.

The size of the Councils varies as set forth in each University's charter or as determined by the rector. At Belarus State University, membership is limited to 100 people. At Francisk Skorina Gomel State University, the Council is 48 members.

Member Appointment Processes

Members of the Academic Council are elected, and the rector approves their appointment. Membership tends to be limited to five-year terms.

Chair Appointment Processes

The rector chairs the Academic Council. The rector is appointed and dismissed by the president of the Republic or the Ministry of Education

depending on the University. It is not uncommon for Republican presidential involvement in the rector selection process.

Board Accountability

The Council is accountable to the rector, who approves or accepts its decisions. The rector also determines the scope of the Council's work by developing the regulations of the Council. At some universities, such as Belarus State University (BSU), a Council decision rejected by the rector may be reviewed again and passed with a two-thirds Council majority. However, another provision in the BSU charter states that "If it is necessary the Rector of the BSU can issue instructions to pass the Academic Council decisions." (Decree of the President of the Republic of Belarus 06.16.1999 N 334, 1999)

Scope of Work

Under the direction of the rector, Academic Councils make recommendations regarding the strategic, financial, personnel, and organizational issues of the University. They undertake decisions such as creating and closing faculties, departments, and institutes; discuss curricular reform and revisions; suggest staff appointments and hold elections for professorships and chairs; and review annual reports. In some instances, they review and make budget recommendations, as well.

For example, the Academic Council at Belarus State University (Decree of the President of the Republic of Belarus 06.16.1999 N 334, 1999):

- reviews University's strategic development and economic development plans;
- reviews and approves key educational, research, and international activities;
- makes proposals on improvement of the BSU structure;
- approves the BSU budget and reviews the annual report on the BSU budget execution;
- nominates staff for key Republican awards such as candidates for the State Prize of the Republic of Belarus, for election into the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, and grants titles of honor, established by the BSU;

- is responsible for holding the elections for positions of professors, chair heads, and chief research workers; and
- solves other problems envisaged by this Statute.

Commentary

University enrollment and the university-aged population in general are decreasing. The economy is controlled by the government via SOEs. So too does the government control the universities, with the government determining curriculum as well as leadership appointments. There seems to be little pressure on universities to perform well beyond preparing students for positions in government and state enterprises. The University governance structure reflects a centralized approach to the country's government. The rector is appointed in some cases directly by the president of Belarus and in other cases by the Ministry. University governance and its supreme body for all intents and purposes are managerial-focused. University governance is a government responsibility. The Ministry is responsible for policy and strategy as well as staffing, program development, and quality assurance. The primary players in campus-level governance are internal University staff, including academic staff as well as University executives. There is some opportunity for external voices, but the numbers of non-university staff are small. The rector is positioned to control and direct the Academic Council given that he or she must approve Council decisions.

The country's context is consistent with the governance structure of its universities. The World Bank governance indicators note low voice and participation, rule of law, and control of corruption. The comparatively high level of government stability means that universities have a predictable policy context in which to work. But this is little comfort given the economy, declining demographics, and the place of the country in the geopolitical and economic region. The country does not seem to have the capacity or want the capacity to have a robust higher education sector beyond accountability to government priorities.